

MIKE SHAYNE

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NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET

TRAGEDY OF ERRORS

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The trouble started with a tiny piece of jade, and a newspaperman's involvement with a murdered man's widow. "I'll do what I can, Tim," Shayne promised . . . and almost wished he hadn't.

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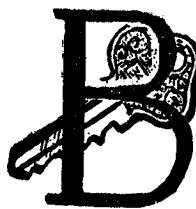
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WHO'S GOT THE LADY?

The ability to appreciate great art and human knavery seldom walk hand in hand. But human nature being what it is . . . there are temptations on any level.

by JACK RITCHIE



ERNICE LECOUR moved the enlarged color photograph of the *Patrician Lady* a bit closer to her easel.

"That enigmatic smile. The Eternal Mysterious Woman."

"Frankly," I said. "I think she's simpering."

Bernice shrugged. "Perhaps. I understand that they had awful teeth in those days and didn't dare grin from ear to ear like our modern beauty queens."

I glanced at my watch. "I have an appointment at Customs and after that I'll drop in at Zarchetti's and steal the rubber stamp."

"Wouldn't it be simpler just to

go to some shop and have a duplicate made?"

"Simpler, yes. But I want the imprint to be absolutely authentic under a microscope. The police will undoubtedly visit Zarchetti looking for one particular stamp and I want them to find it."

Bernice picked up a magnifying glass, studied a corner of her almost completed copy of the *Patrician Lady*, and then carefully applied another stroke of amber. "Have you ever stolen anything before?"

"Only the X-rays."

And that had occurred in Paris three weeks ago. I had been alone with Monsieur Andre Arnaud in

his office completing arrangements for the American exhibition of the *Patrician Lady* when he had been called out of the room.

He had been absent a considerable time and I had found myself wandering idly about, examining this and that, and eventually opening a filing cabinet. It was there that I found the X-rays of the *Patrician Lady*.

I had been mildly startled that they were not under lock and key, but upon further reflection I realized that while the *Patrician Lady* herself might be worth a few million dollars, her X-rays were intrinsically of little value. They were probably not even referred to more than once every two or three years.

No one would possibly want to steal them.

But then I had pondered upon Bernice's enormous talent as a copyist and the fact that we would both be a great deal happier with a large sum of money, and it was at that moment that my plan was born and very rapidly outgrew its swaddling clothes.

I slipped the X-rays under my coat and when Arnaud reappeared I was all innocence and admiring a Rubens sketch upon the wall.

And now Bernice darkened a dab of Siena on her palette. "During his lifetime, the master painted eighty-seven portraits—one hundred and twelve of which are in

the United States." She surveyed her work and sighed. "If I had lived in his time and been a man, I too would have become immortal."

"I prefer you mortal and in this form," I said. I looked at my watch again. "I'm afraid I'll have to go now, Bernice. My appointment with Amos Pulver is at three."

She lifted her eyes momentarily from the canvas. "About the Renoir?"

"Yes."

"What have you decided?"

"It's authentic."

She grinned. "What did you do? Flip a coin?"

I kissed her. "Goodbye, Bernice."

I arrived at the Amos Pulver townhouse a few minutes before three. The others were already there—Louis Kendall, of the Oaks Galleries, and Walter Jameson, who fancied himself an authority on Renoir.

Two months previously Pulver had purchased a Renoir—or what purported to be a Renoir—at the annual Hollingwood auction. The price had been forty-thousand and Pulver had been satisfied—until last week when he had read a magazine article concerning art forgeries while in his dentist's waiting room.

Pulver had immediately assembled the three of us to pass on the authenticity of the painting and

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we had each had the canvas for several days of study.

Now Pulver bit the tip off a cigar and surveyed us. "Well?"

Louis Kendall spoke first. "In my opinion your painting is a forgery."

Jameson regarded Kendall coldly. "You are mistaken. The painting is an original Renoir. There is no question about it."

Amos Pulver turned to me. "What's your verdict?"

I considered a moment and then said, "Your Renoir is absolutely authentic."

"Ridiculous," Kendall snapped. "Any fool can see that the canvas is simply a pathetic attempt to imitate the Renoir dry style."

Walter Jameson raised his favorite eyebrow. "What do you know about Renoir's dry style. I've written six articles on that alone."

Amos Pulver waved a hand. "The hell with his dry style. All I wanted was an official vote and I got that." He removed three checks from his wallet and passed them out. "But I still wish the vote would have been unanimous."

Pulver let Kendall and Jameson leave, but he detained me.

He mixed two bourbons and sodas. "I don't know a damn thing about paintings and couldn't care less. But everybody I know is collecting and I don't want to be left out in the cold with nothing to talk about."

He handed me my glass. "Tell me, do you experts really know what you're doing when you look over a painting?"

"Your bourbon is excellent," I said.

Pulver sipped from his glass. "I read that the *Patrician Lady* is being shipped here for exhibition in the Vandersteen Memorial Wing of The National Art Center.

"A cultural exchange," I said. "France allows us to view her pictures and we are allowed to admire them."

"This one's worth a few million," he said with a touch of reverence. "The greatest painting in the world."

"Yes," I said. "It would appear so."

"I hear they're taking a lot of precautions? Since you're the Vandersteen Wing curator you must be well-informed as to that."

I nodded. "The painting is being transferred by ship. It will be inside a specially constructed case —insulated, cushioned, and air-conditioned."

"I mean they're really guarding it. I hear that at least four armed guards are with it twenty-four hours a day. I understand that when it gets here there will even be a Marine guard."

"With loaded rifles," I said. "Two of them will be stationed beside the painting at all times when it is on exhibition."

He admired the security of the



operation. "I'll bet a thing like that is impossible to steal."

"Virtually impossible," I said. "And if things go well, the American public will next see *Winkler's Brother*."

Pulver thought about something else. "When the *Patrician Lady* gets here, will there be a regular parade down the Avenue? I heard something about drum and bugle corps, baton twirlers, and maybe a couple of Shriner marching bands."

"I'm sorry," I said. "At the last moment some spoil sport cancelled those arrangements."

He brightened a bit. "Well, anyway there will be quite a big ceremony at the Center, won't

there? The governor's going to speak?"

"He will attempt to. But I'm afraid the acoustics are terrible."

When I left, I stopped at the first public phone booth and called Hollingwood. "You won't have to give Pulver his money back. The vote was two to one."

"Good," Hollingwood said. "But I was positive it was an original anyway. I'd stake my reputation on that."

"Nevertheless," I reminded him. "You did take precautions."

"I know," he said. "You'll get your check in the morning."

I took the subway to Zarchetti's Art Supply Shop. In the third floor storeroom I chatted idly with one of the clerks—as is often my habit—while he uncrated newly arrived supplies.

Zarchetti marks his goods in two ways—most of them with an ordinary paper label imprinted with his name, his address, and the inked price of the item. However on certain other objects—raw canvases, for instance—he uses a common rubber stamp wetted with indelible ink.

He once explained to me that art students, being what they are, often remove labels from the cheaper canvases and paste them over the labels of the more expensive ones—thereby escaping past unlearned clerks with treasures worth five times their purchased price.

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I watched the clerk consult his price list, adjust the wheels of a stamp, and affix the marking to a canvas—*Zarchetti's Art Supplies*. 218 Lincoln Avenue. \$10.98.

There were at least half a dozen similar stamps lying about on the tables and I found the opportunity of slipping one of them into my pocket. I doubted if it would ever be missed.

That evening after dinner I read that Bernice had just received second prize of \$1,000 for one of her paintings at the Raleigh Exhibition. It had been for a canvas entitled *Scylla Fourteen*. According to the newspaper article, it consisted of a canvas painted a solid primary blue with just a hair's brush of orange in one corner. It impressed one of the judges as, "A bold venture into the fastness of the unknown—the firm vertical strokes exemplifying the inexorability of the exploding universe. And yet there remains the contradictory, the insistent, unrhymeable orange to contribute a human shriek against the inflexible mathematics of existence." I read that twice.

At eight-thirty, I took a taxi to the National Art Center, let myself in, and went to my office. I unlocked the large bottom drawer of my desk and removed the zipper bag with my tools and materials. At one of the janitor closets in the hall, I picked up a ladder and carried it with me to the Vander-



steen Wing. Its large east gallery, like the rest of the building, was closed to the public at five.

It had been selected for the exhibition of the *Patrician Lady* and for the occasion all other paintings had been removed. The room had been thoroughly re-decorated and painted, and during the process I had taken the pains to secure one of the buckets of wall paint the workmen had used.

The painting was to be hung in a small alcove at the far end—a recess approximately twelve feet wide and four feet deep. Attached to the ceiling at its entrance was a flexible metal lattice, now rolled up somewhat like a window shade. During hours when the painting was not on exhibition, the device would be lowered and locked to the floor, thereby securely shutting off the *Patrician Lady* from the rest of the room. In addition to that, two armed Marines and sundry French and American se-

curity agents would be stationed at all times just outside the alcove.

I examined my work of the previous evenings and again verified that all of it was undetectable to the eye.

Within the alcove itself, to one side, I had drilled a series of holes in a four foot circle, installed powder charges, and primed them. I had further chiseled a groove from the circle to the ceiling. My wiring extended up this groove to the ornate moulding and followed behind it to the rear of the room and down again to the dry cell batteries and to one of the three pushbuttons I had installed behind a heavy, almost immovable, settee.

Using patching plaster to cover the grooves and holes and applying new paint to new paint had concealed my work entirely. I had followed a similar procedure with the installation of the smoke bombs and the charge placed at the metal shutter above the alcove.

So far I had installed two smoke bombs directly inside the alcove, two in the ventilator system, and one in the wall midway down the room. I thought that one more directly opposite the latter would be sufficient for my purposes.

There was little, if any, danger that Fred, the night guard would hear me at work. I had ascertained that he made but one inspection trip every three hours

and then retired to the couch in his cubby-hole in the basement. He there set his alarm for the next round and promptly relapsed into a deep and unshatterable sleep. It was a routine for which he should have been fired, but for the present I found his habits convenient.

I put on my rubber gloves, picked up my chisel and rubber mallet, and went to work. When I finished the opening it was approximately five inches deep and four in diameter. I inserted the last smoke bomb and the small explosive charge. When I pressed one of my pushbuttons the charge would shatter the plaster immediately in front of the bomb, allowing the smoke to pour into the room.

I wired my contrivance, created the channel to the ceiling moulding, and was in the process of splicing to one of my main circuits when I heard the soft voice behind me.

"How are you doing?"

I very nearly fell off the ladder.

However I recovered and turned. "Bernice, *must* you do that?"

She grinned. "I just came to see if you were done."

"How did you manage to get into the building?"

"Darling, you forgot that our keys are common property."

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scended the ladder. "By the way, Bernice, you've been keeping a little secret from me. I had to read that you took second prize at the Raleigh Exhibition. How did you manage to find the title *Scylla Fourteen?*"

She flushed faintly. "I opened the dictionary twice at random. It's the only intellectual way to do things these days."

I began mixing my patching plaster. "Truly a fine painting, Bernice. A bold venture into the fastness of the unknown—the firm vertical strokes exemplifying the inexorability of the exploding universe. And yet there remains the contradictory, the insistent, unrhymeable orange to contribute a—"

"Oh, shut up," Bernice said.

I finished my plastering and cover painting and removed my gloves. "Everything is quite ready now, Bernice. While the governor is speaking, I shall wander casually through the crowd to that green settee and reach behind it.

"When I press the first button, there will be a small sharp explosion. This will destroy the mechanism holding up the metal gate and it will roll down, isolating the *Patrician Lady* from everyone in the room, including the two Marine guards.

"When I have seen that accomplished—perhaps a second or two later—I will press the second button. This will immediately activate

my six smoke bombs. And when the room is sufficiently dense with smoke and confusion, I will press the third button. This will blast open a hole in the alcove—an opening large enough for a man or a woman to crawl through. While carrying a painting, of course."

Bernice nodded approvingly. "And the hole leads to the storage room behind the alcove and the window to the alley will be open?"

"Exactly."

She became thoughtful. "Do you have to wait for the ceremony and all those people to be present? Wouldn't it be much easier if just a few of you were here? The French officials and the guards?"

"No, Bernice. In that event there exists the possibility that the entire incident might be hushed up. And for our purposes we want as much publicity as possible."

"Do you suppose they will suspect that you had anything to do with it?"

"I rather doubt it. If they *dare* to admit any suspicion, it will probably be directed toward the workmen who have been cluttering up the place the last few weeks."

I looked down the long room to the alcove and smiled. "Bernice, one of the advantages of being the curator of an art museum is knowing the collectors with money—and how much the unscrupulous ones will pay for what they want."

The *Patrician Lady* arrived by armored car the next afternoon. Her escort consisted of half a dozen automobiles containing uniformed police, plainclothes men, French and American Secret Servicemen, and the delegation of French officials led by Monsieur Arnaud.

Two squads of United States Marines followed closely in a two and a half ton truck.

After a brief exchange of introductions and handclasps, the entire entourage marched to the east gallery of the Vandersteen Wing.

The crate containing the *Patrician Lady* was there disassembled and she was presented to view.

A sheet of unbreakable glass protected her from crown to spleen. It was my opinion that once she was mounted in the alcove, the thousands who viewed her would see little more than the ornate frame and the glare of glass. However they would all probably depart satisfied, having seen the emperor's clothes.

Arnaud and two of his assistants carried her carefully into the alcove and presently she was in place. Two of the Marines immediately took parade rest positions just outside the recess.

I slipped the rubber stamp out of my pocket and concealed it in the palm of my hand. "Excuse me, gentlemen, I believe the *Patrician Lady* is a fraction of an inch off horizontal."

When I grasped the painting, my fingertips pressed the stamp firmly on the backing of the portrait. I was certain no one had seen what I had done.

I stepped back. "There. Now everything is perfect."

Later that afternoon I managed to slip away to Zarchetti's for a moment and return the stamp. I did not think it had been missed.

At seven-thirty in the evening the Vandersteen Wing was filled to over-flowing with selected first-nighters, all of whom gazed reverently in the direction of the alcove. They were not as yet allowed to approach closer than twenty feet.

The Governor arrived at eight and mounted the small platform set up before the alcove. There were any number of introductions and credits—apparently anyone who had touched the *Patrician Lady's* crate demanded his moment of recognition. Even I, as curator of the gallery, was required to deliver a quota of words.

When I finished, I left the crowded platform to make room for the mayor and his introduction of the Governor.

I made my way slowly through the assemblage to the rear of the room. I put on my gloves, stood next to the green settee, and my fingertips hovered near the push-buttons.

At five minutes after nine, the Governor finally rose and smiled at the audience.

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The moment was appropriate. Everyone's attention focused upon him.

I pressed the first button.

The report from the top of the alcove—much like a rifle shot in close quarters—followed immediately. The heavy mesh roll clanged down its full length to the floor, instantly separating the *Patrician Lady* from every person in the room.

The Marines were startled out of their parade rest and apparently the Governor's initial thought was one of assassination. His hand instinctively explored his chest for hints of a cavity.

I pressed the second button.

The noise of the six explosions were minutely staggered by the echoes against the walls and my

smoke bombs spewed forth their grayish-white vapor.

With a matter of moments complete confusion and the lack of visibility reigned.

I pressed the third button.

The explosion this time was considerably louder as it created the hole in the alcove.

I felt my way blindly into the adjoining room—more or less flowing with the general exodus.

The air here was almost clear and I watched with interest as men in various uniforms dashed in for a breath of fresh air and then back into the east gallery. Most of them had drawn revolvers.

The Governor was one of the last to leave the east gallery, possibly because he had the farthest to travel. But I did not see the Marines. Apparently they remained true to their posts and I could not escape a sense of national pride at their indominability and staying power.

Eventually I heard the tinkling of glass as windows in the east gallery were smashed and the smoke bombs tossed into the alley.

After half an hour the smoke in the big room had dispelled sufficiently so that I could re-enter. Several dozen guards and officials were gathered at the iron grate, either peering through its lattice work or attempting by brute force to raise it. Evidently it had jammed.

I also noticed several uniformed policemen inside the alcove. Ap-

parently they had entered via the storage room and the hole my explosion had created.

A Lieutenant Nelson of the Metropolitan Police organized the strong backs and after mighty groans of exertion the gate was finally raised approximately four feet.

We stopped and entered the alcove.

The *Patrician Lady* appeared unharmed, if a bit askew.

Arnaud's hands fluttered anxiously. "She is unharmed. I think she is unharmed."

Lieutenant Nelson pointed to the hole in the wall. "The way I figure it is that the one who was supposed to steal the painting crawled through there right after the last explosion. But either he lost his nerve, or the smoke got too much for him, so he just backed right out again and left by the open window in the next room."

Arnaud removed the painting carefully from the wall and examined it.

"Let me take a look at her," I said.

He clutched the *Patrician Lady* to his chest. "Monsieur, she is mine."

"Sir," I said sternly. "I am the curator of this gallery and you are on American soil."

It was with great reluctance that he allowed me to remove the painting from his hands.

I examined the front of the

painting and then turned it over. I stared at the backing and then closed my eyes. "Oh, no!"

Quickly I turned the painting back over and attempted to rehang the *Patrician Lady*. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with her, gentlemen. *Absolutely* nothing."

But Arnaud snatched away the *Patrician Lady*. He peered at the backing too—as did everyone else in the alcove.

They all saw the blue-inked stamping, but it was Lieutenant Nelson who had the nerve to read the words aloud. "Zarchetti's Art Supplies. Two-eighteen Lincoln Avenue. Fourteen dollars and ninety-eight cents."

He rubbed his jaw and stared at Arnaud. "Are you people *sure* you shipped the original to this country?"

Arnaud was pale. "Of course we shipped the original." He looked at the stamping again. "I do not understand," he said plaintively.

We all stood silent with thoughts that were probably exemplified when Lieutenant Nelson finally spoke. "Suppose they *switched* paintings while all the commotion was going on and nobody could see?"

None of us said anything and so he continued. "I heard that some of these art forgers are real masters. They can age the paint and the canvas so that *nobody* can tell the difference. Not even an expert." He cogitated further and

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then brightened. "But like all crooks, they slipped up on a little thing. They missed seeing that Zar-chetti label on the backing when they put the whole thing together."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said coldly. "This is the *original Patrician Lady*. Isn't that correct, Monsieur Arnaud?;"

He was still pale and now he regarded the painting with a trace of suspicion. "I do not remember seeing this dent in the frame."

"The explosion," I said hastily.

But Arnaud was not listening. We all allowed him thoughtful and respectful silence until he came to a decision. "There is only one way to be positive. I will send for the X-rays in Paris. A clever forger may possibly delude even the best of experts, but he cannot fool the X-ray. He could not possibly duplicate every nuance of the paint—its thickness or thinness in strategic spots. And he certainly could not duplicate what is behind the paint—the microscopic individuality of every thread on the original canvas."

Arnaud turned to me. "Mr. Parnell, lead me to a telephone."

In my office we put through a call to Paris and waited on the open line. After a considerable interval, one of his subordinates evidently returned to the phone.

Arnaud listened and appeared about to faint. But he pulled himself together, issued further sharp orders in French, and then hung

up. "Some idiot of a file clerk has misplaced the X-rays of the *Patrician Lady*. However, never fear. I have given the command to ransack the files ruthlessly. The X-rays shall be found."

But, of course, they never were.

One week later a distinguished panel of twenty French and American art experts met in convocation to study and pass upon the authenticity of the *Patrician Lady*.

After a month, the results of their examination were made public.

Twelve of them pronounced the work to be truly the original. Six declared that it was a clever forgery. And two maintained that it was a clumsy forgery.

The Governor took it upon himself to publicly proclaim his faith in the majority opinion and he was backed by the State Senate, 64 to 56. The vote was strictly along party lines.

The *Patrician Lady* returned to France. However Paris announced that it had cancelled plans to replace her with *Winkler's Brother*.

MY APPEARANCE was thoroughly muted by a false beard and dark glasses. Further, I wore a black wig and spoke with a slight French accent.

Though I had met Mr. Duncan a number of times, I felt positive that he did not have the slightest inkling of my real identity.

I began putting the money into

my suitcase. Two hundred thousand dollars—none of it in bills larger than one hundred—is quite bulky.

Ducan stared at the painting, his eyes awed, and yet triumphant. "So it really was stolen."

"Monsieur," I said. "I know nothing about the stealing. Absolutely nothing. The *Patrician Lady* merely came—accidentally—into my hands."

He smiled knowingly. "Of course." His eyes went back to his new possession. "Millions of fools will look at that copy in Paris, and all the time *I've* got the original."

"You understand, of course, Monsieur," I said, "that you may show the painting to no one else. No one. It is for your private enjoyment. If it were discovered that you possess the original *Patrician Lady*, the authorities would take it away from you and even put you into prison."

He nodded. "I'll keep it under lock and key. No one will see it.

Not even my wife will see it!"

I could understand the last precaution. She was currently his fourth and might prove vindictive in any divorce action.

I closed the suitcase. "Goodbye, Monsieur Duncan. You are indeed fortunate to have a million dollar painting for only one fifth of that sum."

In my taxi I sat back and relaxed. So far Bernice Lecour had made six copies of the *Patrician Lady* and I had had no difficulty in disposing of them as originals.

Perhaps Bernice and I could have stolen the authentic *Patrician Lady*, but then the police of the entire world would have joined the search for the thieves.

It was much safer this way—merely to create the suspicion that she *might* have been stolen, and to capitalize upon it.

I thought that now Bernice and I deserved a vacation. Brazil should be interesting.

Perhaps we would not return.



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